DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 290 377 HE 021 067

AUTHOR Simon, Kathleen
TITLE Using Student Evaluations To Improve Teaching and Make Personnel Decisions.
PUB DATE 27 Aug 87
NOTE 13p.
PUB TYPE Information Analyses (070) -- Viewpoints (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Case Studies; *College Faculty; College Instruction; Employment Practices; *Faculty Promotion; Higher Education; *Instructional Improvement; Personnel Policy; *Student Evaluation of Teacher Performance; *Teacher Effectiveness; *Tenure

ABSTRACT

The literature concerning the use of student evaluations to improve college teaching and to help make decisions concerning tenure and promotion is reviewed, along with ways that several colleges have used these evaluations to improve the quality of teaching. Many studies indicate that properly-administered, well-constructed rating forms can provide reliable and valid information concerning teacher effectiveness and can help identify weaknesses and strengths in the teaching-learning process. To be used effectively, evaluation forms must be analyzed systematically and the results communicated to the faculty in a way to enhance their professional development. The most important use of student evaluations is to improve classroom instruction. Student evaluations can be combined with peer and self-evaluation to improve teaching quality. Student ratings are increasingly being used for decisions concerning tenure and promotion. The issue of making teacher evaluations public is addressed. It is recommended that when student evaluations are used, they should clearly indicate which elements of a course need change. The college should also make training opportunities available so that teachers can strengthen their knowledge and skills. (SW)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED290377

Using Student Evaluations To Improve Teaching and Make Personnel Decisions

Kathleen Simon

Associate Professor, English

Shawnee State University

August 27, 1987

Phone No. - 614-354-3205 (school)
614-259-4059 (home)

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Kathleen Simon

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

CE052062

Abstract

Although student evaluations have been used to measure teaching effectiveness for over forty years, their use is both a sensitive and controversial issue. However, numerous studies have shown that if administered properly, well-constructed rating forms can provide reliable information concerning teaching effectiveness. The purpose of this paper is to show how student evaluations can be used to improve teaching and to help make decisions concerning promotion and tenure. It also examines the ways in which several colleges have used these evaluations to improve the quality of teaching at their institutions.

Using Student Evaluations To Improve
Teaching and Make Personnel Decisions

Most colleges and universities expect faculty to perform effectively in three areas: scholarly activity, service to the institution, and effective teaching. Although the first two of these areas are fairly easily measured, controversy continues to exist concerning exactly what constitutes effective teaching and how it can be measured. One method that has been employed for over forty years (Raskin, 1979) is the use of student evaluations.

However, the subject of student evaluation of college faculty is both a sensitive and controversial issue for a number of reasons. Many studies have indicated that the validity of these evaluations can be affected by everything from the class size (R. Miller, 1975), class location (R. Miller, 1975), and class time (R. Miller, 1975) to the sex of the students in the class (Mueller, 1951); Doyle, 1975). Other studies have found that the type of student rating form may affect the reliability of evaluations (Goldschmid, 1978).

Even though no reliable method of ensuring perfectly valid student ratings has been formulated, the consensus of numerous studies has been that if they are administered properly, well-constructed rating forms can provide "both reliable and valid information concerning teaching effectiveness" (Van Allen, 1982, p. 41). Because learning psychologists generally agree on the importance of feedback in the acquisition and change of various behavior patterns and because students are in the best position to provide this feedback, most educators agree that, if used judiciously, student evaluation of faculty can help teachers and administrators identify weaknesses and strengths in the teaching-learning process. However, this will not occur if the evaluation forms are simply collected each quarter: to be used effectively, they must be

analyzed systematically and the results communicated to the faculty in a way that will enhance their professional development.

The most important use of student evaluations is to improve classroom instruction. However, as many studies have shown, "good" teaching is difficult to define and identify. To some students an excellent instructor is one who has "personality and . . . brilliant, exciting, and witty lectures . . . lucid exposition, fine rapport with students . . . and availability to all who seek extra help or a sympathetic ear" while to others, it is one who "produced real learning in the sense of substantial improvements in students' achievements" (Machlup, 1979, p. 376). A study of second-year undergraduate students at Tel-Aviv University found that a good teacher was first and foremost a professional person who could convey information in a clear, organized, interesting manner. Personality, rapport with students, and research ability (which is considered to be highly important in the university's view) were found to be of secondary importance (Miron, 1978). However one defines effective teaching--be it the emotional or cognitive aspect of instruction--improvement may be made if student evaluations are used in a carefully prescribed manner.

One way to use evaluation forms to improve teaching is by changing the timing of their distribution. Richard Miller believes that "the instrument should be used twice per school term . . . Given early in the term, the evaluation is used only by the teacher, who compares student responses with his personal rating on the self-evaluation form. This early-term evaluation allows the teacher some appraisal of his classroom performance at a point when time is left for modification" (1972, p. 27). James O'Hanlon points out that data are available which indicate that instructors do make changes after analyzing mid-term evaluations and that administering the forms twice each quarter or

semester is psychologically beneficial to the students since they can see the results of using evaluations (1980).

Student evaluations can also be used to improve the quality of instruction if they are combined with peer and self-evaluation. Although Gordon Greenwood found that student ratings don't correlate highly with other kinds of ratings, they can be useful if combined with other types of procedures (1980). There is evidence that if self-evaluations are used at mid-term in conjunction with student evaluations, there are changes in teaching practices especially when the instructor rates himself more favorably than do his students (Goldshmid, 1978). Peter Seldin cites several studies which indicate that a teacher's performance will improve if he realizes that "The students' view of his teaching is much dimmer than his" (1982, p. 72).

Several studies of college evaluations have found that out-of-class observations yielded appraisals which are typically validated against student ratings of teaching (Cohen, 1980). Evaluations by peers may help a faculty member improve by serving as a supplement to student input in areas where students are not highly qualified to evaluate--such as knowledge of the subject, course objectives and syllabus, outside reading lists, etc. (Weinbach, 1984).

On some college and university campuses students have access to a course handbook (sometimes referred to as a "counter-or-anti-calendar") which gives student ratings of the teachers. Unfortunately, these books seem to be more useful in helping students avoid low-rated teachers than in helping those teachers improve. Raymond Perry believes that these evaluation books create a "self-fulfilling prophecy because they bias subsequent ratings in the same direction as the earlier evaluations" (1974, p. 851). He states that these rating books might induce the better students to sign up for courses taught by

highly-rated instructors, leaving the weaker, less-motivated students to the teachers who had received less positive ratings. Marcel Goldschmid also does not believe that publishing the results of student evaluations serves a constructive purpose. However, the fact that students decide to evaluate their courses and instructors and make the results public indicates that they are not happy about the quality of the instruction they are receiving and, therefore, they are probably trying to pressure the faculty to take their opinions seriously and make an effort to improve their teaching (1978). A compromise might be to publish only the highest evaluations in the anticalendar and communicate the low ratings directly to the respective professors. This plan would "reward effective teaching directly and increase its value through social recognition . . . and reduce the punishing effects of negative evaluations at least at the social level" (Perry, 1974, p. 95).

Just as some students think that teacher evaluations should be made public, at least one critic believes that the validity and usefulness of these forms would improve if the names of the evaluators were made known to the instructor. Although most experts believe that student evaluations should remain anonymous, Marcia Pulich states that under this system a student has no accountability for his or her remarks. She feels that requiring a student to identify his or her form would "force the student to be more objective and rational about teacher evaluation" (1984, p. 94). She also contends that such a system is more like the real world where performance evaluators have to identify themselves. It is Ms. Pulich's belief that a professor would be better able to improve his/her teaching effectiveness "if he or she has full, complete, and objective information from the students" (p. 94).

Whether or not the forms are filled out anonymously, the results should be made available to the faculty and, according to Richard Miller the "primary

purpose of systematic evaluation should be for individual professional development' (1972, p. 78). Goldschmid believes that the evaluations must indicate exactly which elements of a course need change or modification. Then the faculty must be given the chance to become professionals and learn more about the teaching process.

Richard Miller states that "improvement in instruction means using the results to assist those who are tired, and to encourage those who are uncertain. It may include attending refresher courses, working with acknowledged master teachers, undertaking special study programs . . . (175, p. 8).

Since many faculty members have not had training in education either before or after their appointment, a number of colleges and universities have developed programs for staff development known by such names as higher education advisory and research centers, pedagogical service units, or faculty development institutes. By offering documentation services, workshops, seminars, and consultation on effective teaching and by engaging in research on instruction, these units attempt to provide "impetus for teaching improvement efforts" (Goldschmid, 1978, p. 233). In response to student concerns about the quality of instruction, Virginia Commonwealth University set up workshops to sharpen teaching and evaluation skills, obtain feedback on teaching behavior, and clarify values of teaching and learning (Wergin, 1976). At Andrews University the Committee on Instruction and Research gives attention to the University's teaching program. The committee may inaugurate new programs relating to teaching improvement, enhance the instructional environment, and recommend policies to the faculty and administrators concerning matters relating to teaching. The center also conducts seminars about student evaluation of teaching and helps teachers in such areas as course requirements, teaching styles, and grading (Smoot, 1978).

In the early 1970's an experiment was conducted to improve the quality of teaching at San Jose State University. An ad hoc committee composed of faculty and students surveyed President's scholars (fulltime students who receive A's in all courses for two consecutive semesters) to elicit their views concerning the education they were receiving. The results of this symposium were published and distributed to the faculty in order to "start campus-wide student-faculty discussions about ways to improve teaching and learning" (Rinn, 1981, p. 125). Although the experiment has not been repeated, the results of the 1970 survey have been used as standard orientation material at San Jose State for new faculty members. Both committee members and the participating President's Scholars feel that the project was worthwhile because it focused attention on students' views concerning what constitutes excellent teaching.

At Andrews University, a survey of student opinion on the quality of instruction is done each year. The results of this survey are tabulated on a computer and each teacher sees his own ratings. Each department then meets to discuss ways in which members might work to improve weaknesses in the teaching program (Smoot, 1978).

Although the main purpose for evaluation should be the professional improvement of the faculty member, the data should be used to help make decisions concerning promotion and tenure (Miller, 1972), and student ratings are increasingly being used for this purpose (Centra, 1977). Research by Wilson and Hildebrand has suggested that the best and worst teachers perform about the same academic activities (R. Miller, 1972). Too much weight is often put on research-based criteria for promotion, salary increases, and tenure because "they are fairly easily objectified and even quantified. Such criteria are rarely found in assessments of teaching . . . . Student evaluations allow for such criteria and hence give teaching a 'fighting chance' against research

as a basis for evaluating faculty performance" (Bergquist, 1975, p. 187).

Since the promotion and tenure decision is extremely important to both the institution and faculty member, Richard Miller feels that it should be based on the broadest possible valid information "in order that the individual is given the choice to demonstrate his worth. Therefore, valid and reliable faculty evaluation should play an important role in promotion and tenure decisions (1975, p. 8).

The Oregon State System of Higher Education evidently believes that student evaluations have sufficient reliability and validity to use as an indicator of teaching effectiveness because they have enacted a policy requiring "appropriate student input into the evidence accumulated as the basis for reappointment, promotion, and tenure decisions" (Thorne, 1980, p. 207). In the early 1980's the Board of Trustees of the California State University and College system sparked a "firestorm" of criticism from the faculty by an order to place students on personnel committees (Rinn, 1981).

The California controversy shows that using student evaluations and opinions for promotion and tenure decisions is a controversial issue. Fritz Machlup doesn't believe that high student evaluations should be the basis for promotion, tenure, and salary increases because students aren't qualified to judge good teaching. "What goes over well is not necessarily what ought to be learned" (1979, p. 377). Stanley Miller states that students can be misled to confuse the teacher's charisma or the student's feeling good about themselves with teaching effectiveness (1984). Betty Raskin fears that "the threat . . . that the results of evaluations will be used to deny promotion or tenure or merit pay leads one to assume that a minority, at the very least, will yield to the temptation of pleasing their judges by offering pop courses, . . . the writing of fewer papers . . . less difficult examinations, and will above all,

contribute to grade inflation" (1979, p. 382).

However, Gaylord Thorne believes that a majority of students are satisfied with most of their instructors and courses, so the results of student ratings being used in promotion and tenure decisions only pose a threat to a minority of teachers (1980). Fauneil Rinn thinks that it should be possible to "poll student opinion in a way that quells faculty misgivings and, at the same time, achieves the benefits of a strong student voice" (1981, p. 126).

Perhaps a compromise is offered by W.J. McKeachie who has suggested that student ratings be evaluated "by peers who know the circumstances under which a particular course was taught. Certain course characteristics such as size of a class, whether or not it is required, and subject matter differences within a department exert an influence on student ratings" (Cohen, 1980, p. 158). Cohen believes that colleagues who have taught under similar course environment constraints are cognizant of special circumstances that need to be considered when evaluating student ratings. It seems reasonable to suggest that they should be involved in interpreting student data.

If administered properly, student evaluations can be a valuable tool that provides reliable information about teaching performance and effectiveness. When such evaluation is used, its purpose should be to clearly indicate exactly which elements of a course need change or modification. Then the college or university should make training opportunities available so that each teacher is given the chance to strengthen his or her knowledge of the subject and teach it effectively.

Reference List

Bergquist, W. & Phillips, S. (1975). Components of an effective faculty development program. Journal of Higher Education, 56, 177-209.

Centra, J.A. (1977). Student ratings of instruction and their relationship to student learning. American Educational Research Journal, 14, 17-24.

Cohen, P.A. & McKeachie, W.J. (1980). The role of colleagues in the evaluation of college teaching. Improving College and University Teaching, 28, 147-54.

Doyle, K. (1975). Student evaluation and instruction. Lexington, Mass: D.C. Heath.

Goldschmid, M.L. (1978). The evaluation and improvement of teaching in higher education. Higher Education, 7, 221-45.

Greenwood, G.E. & Ramagli, H.J. Alternatives to student ratings of college teaching. Journal of Higher Education, 51, 673-84.

Machlup, F. (1979). Poor learning from good teachers. Academe, 65, 376-80.

Miller, R. (1972). Evaluating faculty performance. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Miller, R. (1975). Developing programs for faculty evaluation. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Millers, S. (1984). Student rating scales for tenure and promotion. Improving College and University Teaching, 32, 87-90.

Miron, M. & Segal, E. (1978). The "good university teacher" as perceived by the students. Higher Education, 7, 27-34.

Mueller, F.J. (1951). Trends in student ratings of faculty. American Association of University Professors, 37, 319-24.

O'Hanlon, J.O. & Mortensen, L. (1980). Making teacher evaluation work. Journal of Higher Education, 51, 664-72.

Perry, R.P. et al (1974). Effect of prior teaching evaluations and lecture presentation on ratings of teaching performance. Journal of Educational Psychology, 66, 851-56.

Pulich, M.A. (1984). Better use of student evaluations for teaching effectiveness. Improving College and University Teaching, 32, 91-94.

Raskin, B.L. & Plant, P. (1979) The student devaluation of teachers. Academe, 65, 382-83.

Rinn, F.J. (1981). Student opinion on teaching: threat or chance for dialogue? Improving College and University Teaching, 29, 125-26.

Seldin, P. (1982). Self-assessment of college teaching. Improving College and University Teaching, 30, 70-74.

Smoot, J.G. (1978). Faculty development and evaluation at a small university. Improving College and University Teaching, 26, 87-90.

Thorne, G.L. (1980). Student ratings of instructors: from scores to administrative decisions. Journal of Higher Education, 51, 207-14.

Van Allen, G.H. (1982). Students rate community college faculty as slightly above average. Community College Review, 10, 41-43.

Weinbach, R.W. & Randolph, J.R. (1984). Peer review for tenure and promotion in professional schools. Improving College and University Teaching, 32, 81-94.

Wergin, J.F. et al (1976). The practice of faculty development: an experience-derived model. Journal of Higher Education, 47, 289-308.